



Pennsylvania
Department of Drug and
Alcohol Programs



PennState
Harrisburg

Douglas W. Pollock Center for
Addiction Outreach and Research

SEPTEMBER 24, 2025

Rewriting the Story: Talking About the Opioid Crisis and Substance Use with Care



Welcome & Introduction

STEPHANY DUGAN

PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF DRUG AND ALCOHOL PROGRAMS,
COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

SECRETARY DR. LATIKA DAVIS-JONES

PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF DRUG AND ALCOHOL PROGRAMS

INTRODUCTION

Recording Disclosure

- All attendees are muted
- Session is being recorded
- Recording will be available on demand
- By joining, you consent to recording, retention, and use

INTRODUCTION

Q & A

- Use the Q&A panel for presenter questions
- We'll answer in the Q&A portion of the presentation reserved for the end of the webinar

INTRODUCTION

Today's Discussion

Welcome & Introduction

STEPHANY DUGAN

Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs, Communications Director

SECRETARY DR. LATIKA DAVIS-JONES

Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs

Life Unites Us: Anti-Stigma Campaign

WESTON KENSINGER, PH.D., CHES

Penn State Pollock Center for Addiction Outreach and Research, Director

ERICA SAYLOR, MPH

Penn State Pollock Center for Addiction Outreach and Research, Research Associate

Language Guidance

ASHLEY NARVAEZ

Shatterproof National Stigma Initiative, Program Manager

Reporting Best Practices

HANNA WEBSTER

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Health Reporter

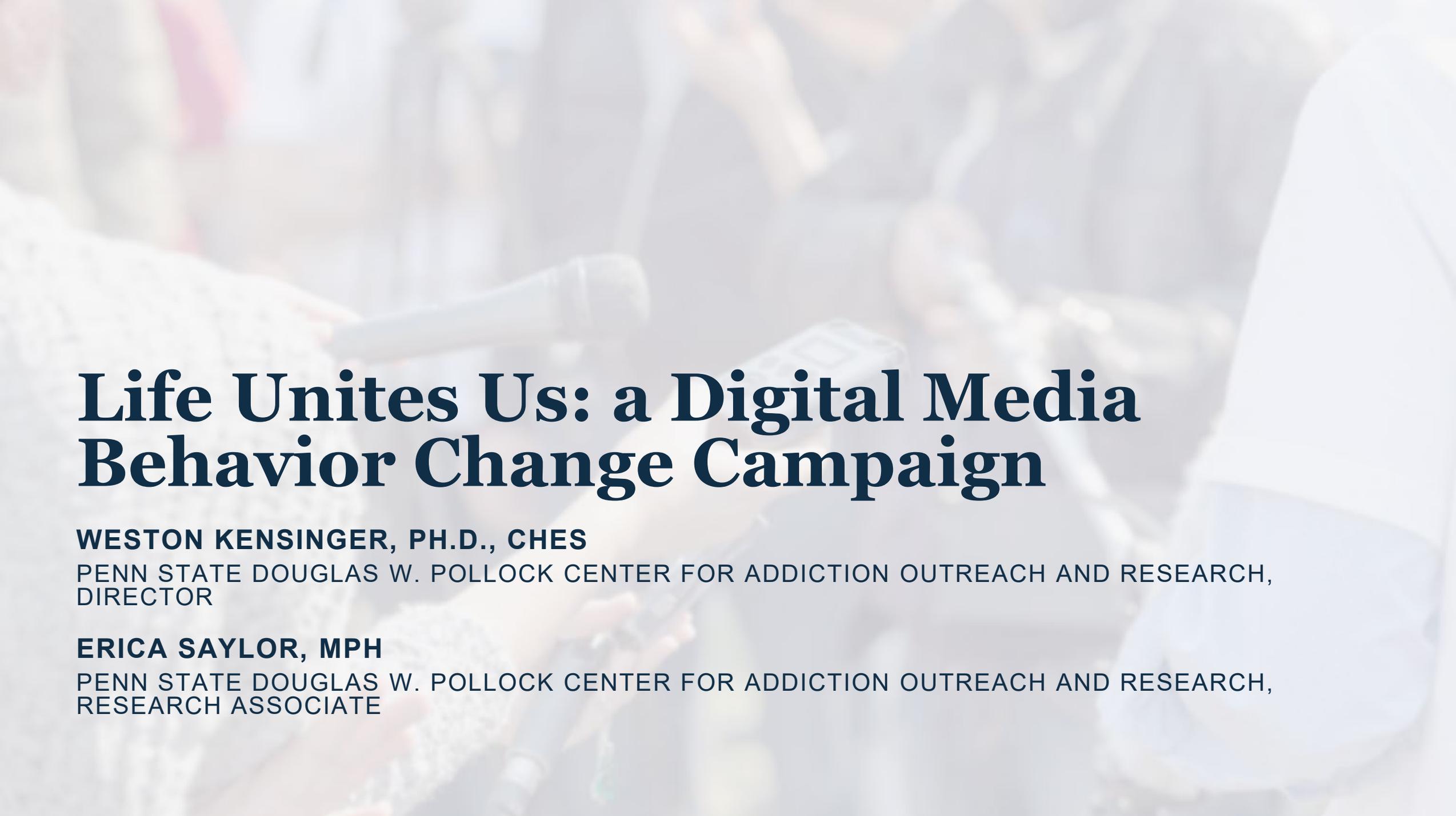
Q&A

WELCOME

Message from the Secretary

Dr. Latika Davis-Jones





Life Unites Us: a Digital Media Behavior Change Campaign

WESTON KENSINGER, PH.D., CHES

PENN STATE DOUGLAS W. POLLOCK CENTER FOR ADDICTION OUTREACH AND RESEARCH,
DIRECTOR

ERICA SAYLOR, MPH

PENN STATE DOUGLAS W. POLLOCK CENTER FOR ADDICTION OUTREACH AND RESEARCH,
RESEARCH ASSOCIATE

OVERVIEW

Life Unites Us: An Effort to Reduce SUD Stigma

Our Common Agenda: Life Unites Us is an evidence-based behavior change public health intervention designed to reduce addiction-related stigma of substance use disorder (SUD) in the state of Pennsylvania. The campaign is a collaborative effort between *Penn State, the Public Good Projects, and Shatterproof – in close partnership with and funded through the Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs.*

Increase knowledge about and decrease stigma around those living with SUD throughout Pennsylvania



Knowledge

Increasing knowledge about SUD and that recovery is possible with the proper support



Attitudes

Improving attitudes toward those living with and/or in recovery from SUD



Behaviors

Increasing self-efficacy to provide support, and/or instances of providing support among those who have a loved one with SUD

OVERVIEW

Life Unites Us: An Effort to Reduce SUD Stigma



Life Unites Us leverages education-based, contact-based, and advocacy-based strategies to increase knowledge about and decrease stigma around those living with SUD throughout Pennsylvania.

Research & Evaluation
Public Stigma Surveys
In-Depth Interviews
Formative Research

Stigma-reduction key messages informed by ongoing research and evaluation

Digital Stigma Reduction Activities

- Social Media
- Influencers
- Website (Education & story library)

Partnership Collaboration & Education

- Testimonial Outreach & Submission
- Monthly Email Newsletters
- Webinars
- Data Briefs & Data Portal / Dashboard
- Grant Award Program
- Public Good News

Digital Performance Metrics, Community Feedback, Community Impact Committee, and ongoing partner conversations

OVERVIEW

A Contact-Based Approach for Pennsylvanians

Contact-based education uses social contact to improve relations among groups that are experiencing stigma and discrimination – sharing personal stories of people with a stigmatized condition to audiences who may hold stigmatizing beliefs towards them.

Sharing stories to reduce stigma:

- Break down barriers that foster **discomfort and fear**;
- **Humanize** stigmatized individuals and **reduce social distance**.

Best Performing Content: 2024

Life Unites Us
Sponsored · 🌐

Naloxone, sold as the nasal spray Narcan, is now sold over the counter, which means you can purchase it at grocery stores, ...See more

People with addiction don't need stigma.
They need support.

Messenger

4

Like

Impressions: 420,818
Reach: 207,443
Engagements: 306

Life Unites Us
Sponsored · 🌐

Effective treatment options for addiction exist, but stigma often prevents people from getting help. Fighting stigma makes it ...See more

Anyone can struggle with addiction.

No one deserves to be stigmatized for it.

lifeunitesus.com

Share your story

This campaign

Impressions: 262,330
Reach: 159,531
Engagements: 160

Life Unites Us
Sponsored · 🌐

Recovery is more than possible: It's probable. Recovery changed Anthony's life, and it's changed the lives of 20 million ...See more

My name is Anthony

lifeunitesus.com
Story Library

Watch more

1.3K

Like

Views: 110,211

Life Unites Us
Sponsored · 🌐

For more than 30 years, Laurie has been in recovery. But for even longer than that, Laurie has been a caring daughter. She's ...See more

lifeunitesus.com
Story Library

Watch more

1K

Like

Views: 62,473

Community Feedback Highlights

David S
I'm proud of you!!! 16 months 26 days sober myself!

Tina L
I don't know u but we have same story ,brother I'm proud of u

Lisa W
Stay encouraged Anthony God bless you you can do it I am a walking testimony God can deliver you from your addiction praying for you God bless you

jcg1510E
We Can And Do Recover 3 of Us Dad Bro and Myself total over 100 Years Of Clean Time

Ann Marie W
My heart goes out to you this is happening so much lately and it's breaking my heart losing our children over this God bless you

Jane L
Sending my deepest sympathy.. I lost my daughter five years ago..we belong to a club nobody wants to be in. I compare it to a scab that never heals. When a memory, a place or ant number of memories come up it rips the scan off again.

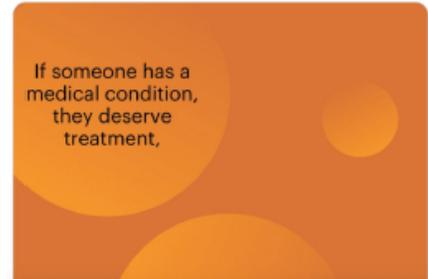
Karen G
My daughter was 42 when she lost her battle with addiction 😭

wentndoneit 8w
Proud to be part of this page. Was honored that u shared my story. ❤️
1 like Reply

lifeunitesuspa 7w
@wentndoneit Thank you so much, Jeff! We're honored to share your story and grateful to have you as part of our community ❤️

Lisa Falbo ▶ **The SHARE Project Public Page**
October 9 at 8:57 PM · 🌐
Addiction is a medical condition; people should have access to treatment that works, just like they would for diabetes or heart disease.

The SHARE Project
March 22 at 5:10 AM · 🌐
Unlike heart disease or diabetes, addiction is stigmatized. Stigma makes it harder for people to get effective treatment, including medication for opioid use disorder. We know that Medication first Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) works; ending stigma makes it more likely that people can access it.



Carrie Diggs
1d · 🌐
Narcan saved my life



Life Unites Us
Love Share

bcdacinc 40w
@lifeunitesuspa

There are many tools that help people with addiction get better, but because of stigma, they aren't accessible to everyone who needs them. Addiction is a medical condition – just like diabetes – and people with it should be able to access the tools proven to help them.

#LifeUnitesUs #EndAddictionStigma #RecoveryIsPossible

Highlights: 2023-2024

KEY DIGITAL METRIC HIGHLIGHTS

9.9M

Impressions through paid and organic social media content

2.3M

Video views of testimonials, montages, and key stigma reduction video content

1.9M+

Pennsylvanians reached through digital campaign activities

TESTIMONIALS

36

New stories added to the story library on the Life Unites Us website

PARTNERSHIP SUPPORT

205

Engaged partners committed to spreading stigma reduction messaging

437

Attendees across 6 webinars on a variety of topics all helping to decrease the stigma around SUD

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

161.8K

Added impressions/exposure to stigma reduction messaging through local online influencers

53

Influencer posts across Instagram, Facebook and TikTok from 32 unique influencers

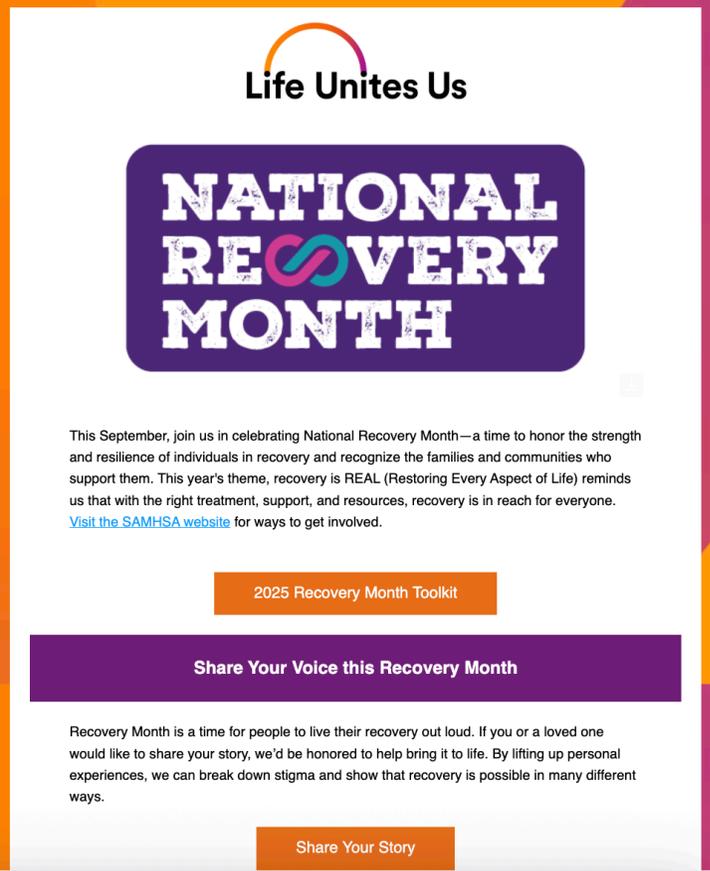
Collective Impact: Driven by Community

Collective impact is a network of community members, organizations, and institutions who advance equity by learning together, aligning, and integrating their actions to achieve population and systems level change.



Offerings

- Community Impact Committee
- Community Award Grant
- Data Portal
- Trainings & Webinars
- Community Building Workbook
- Newsletter



The graphic features a white background with a purple and orange border. At the top, a rainbow arch is positioned above the text "Life Unites Us". Below this is a purple rounded rectangle containing the text "NATIONAL RECOVERY MONTH" in white, with a stylized infinity symbol in pink and teal between the words "RE" and "VERY".

This September, join us in celebrating National Recovery Month—a time to honor the strength and resilience of individuals in recovery and recognize the families and communities who support them. This year's theme, recovery is REAL (Restoring Every Aspect of Life) reminds us that with the right treatment, support, and resources, recovery is in reach for everyone. [Visit the SAMHSA website](#) for ways to get involved.

2025 Recovery Month Toolkit

Share Your Voice this Recovery Month

Recovery Month is a time for people to live their recovery out loud. If you or a loved one would like to share your story, we'd be honored to help bring it to life. By lifting up personal experiences, we can break down stigma and show that recovery is possible in many different ways.

Share Your Story

Offerings

Public Good News (PGN) is a nonprofit newsroom dedicated to community health. PGN partners with trusted local voices throughout the U.S. to distribute accurate, accessible, and inclusive health news in English and Spanish.

Keep an eye out for:

- Local stories centered around the work of local organizations, providing real-life examples on how orgs are responding to SUD and recovery topics.
- Partnership opportunities for community organizations to pitch topics and be featured + collaboration with newsrooms to republish and co-author stories.
- Community roundtable with local journalists and organizations to inform unbiased, non-stigmatizing SUD reporting and best practices for writing.



Substance use



How to safely store and dispose of medication

BY RO WHITE SEPTEMBER 12, 2025

Misused medication can be especially dangerous for kids and teens in your household. Store and dispose of it correctly.



More choices for recovery: How health workers can connect communities to science-backed resources

BY ADRIANA DÍAZ AUGUST 27, 2025



How misinformation about fentanyl exposure threatens to undermine overdose response

BY HENRY LARWEH, KFF HEALTH NEWS APRIL 18, 2025



Lo que sabemos sobre la relación entre el alcohol y el cáncer

BY VALERIA RICCIULLI FEBRUARY 10, 2025

Latest stories



The national suicide hotline for LGBTQ+ youth shut down. States are scrambling to help.



How to safely store and dispose of medication



The community care model helping people recover outside hospitals

Data Collection

An evidenced-based, mixed methods approach

- Literature reviews
- Quantitative Surveys
- Qualitative Interviews
- Project ECHO Stigma Reduction Pilots
 - Community
 - Healthcare



42 Month Survey Results

Several trends in average responses were identified since the launch of the campaign:

- **31.7%** of the respondents viewed the Life Unites Us campaign
- Pennsylvanians indicated **increasing willingness** to purchase or obtain naloxone
- Pennsylvanians have indicated **increasing agreement** that fentanyl test strips should be used as an overdose prevention strategy

Topic Area	Statement (% of people who agreed with each statement)	Not Campaign Aware	Campaign Aware
Public	With effective treatment, most people would get better and return to productive lives.	51.0%	62.2%
Medications	Naltrexone is an effective treatment for opioid use disorder	20.4%	36.4%
Naloxone	I would be willing to obtain naloxone, a medication that can quickly help a person experiencing a life-threatening drug overdose	60.8%	71.5%
Social Exclusion	I would be willing to have a person with OUD as a neighbor	36.8%	45.6%

CONNECT WITH US

Getting Involved

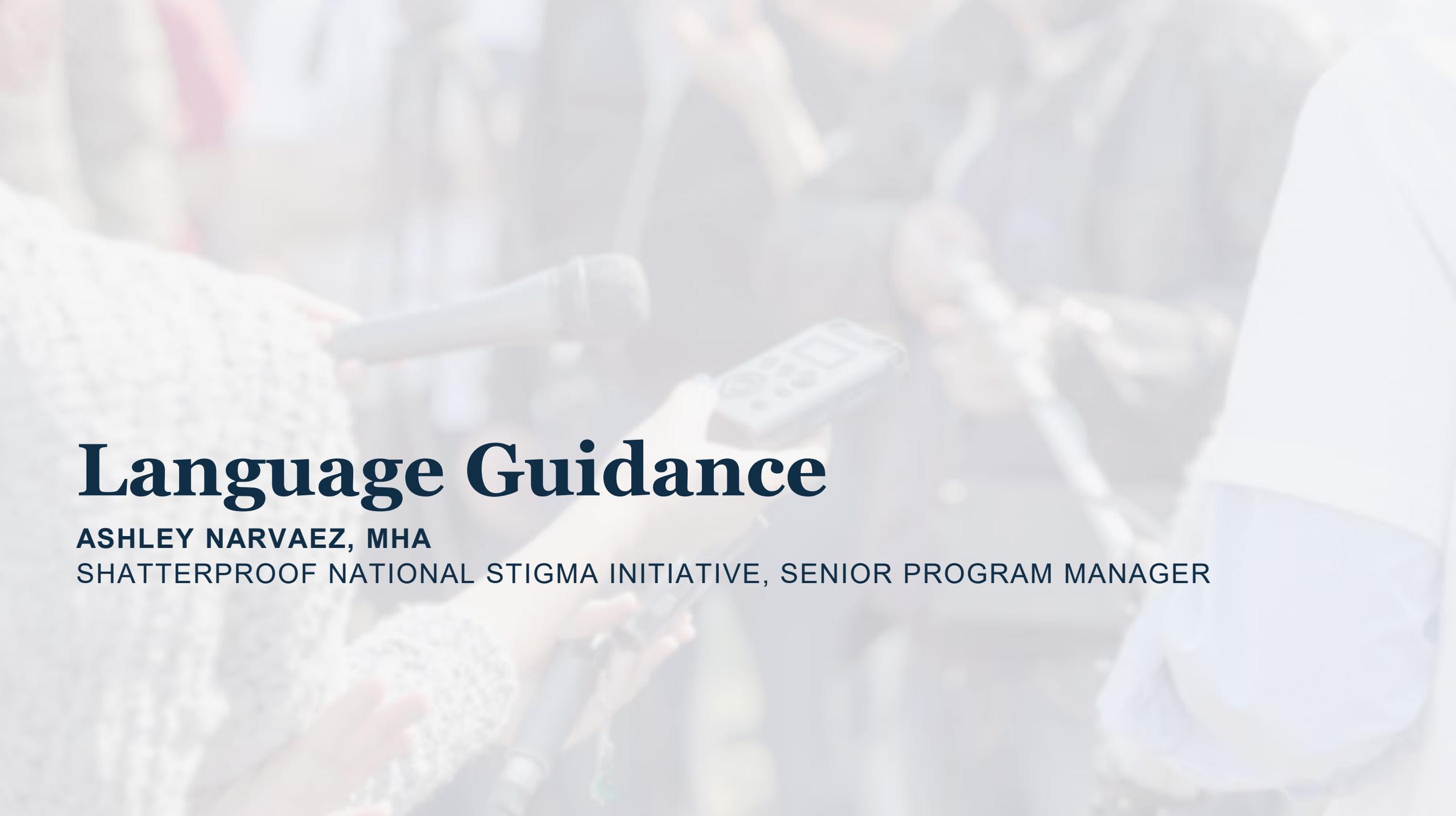


Instagram / X:
[@LifeUnitesUsPA](#)

Facebook / YouTube:
[@LifeUnitesUs](#)

Website:
www.LifeUnitesUs.com





Language Guidance

ASHLEY NARVAEZ, MHA

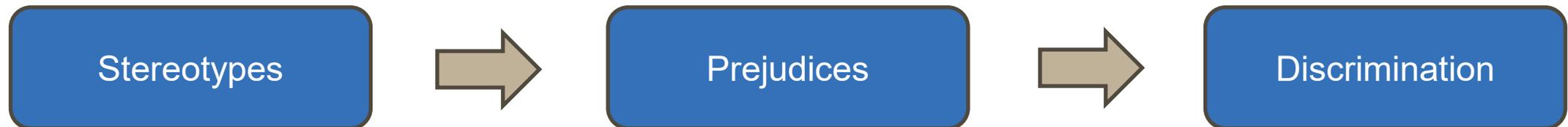
SHATTERPROOF NATIONAL STIGMA INITIATIVE, SENIOR PROGRAM MANAGER

BUT FIRST, A REFRESHER ON STIGMA

What is stigma?

Stigma is a socially and culturally constructed process that reproduces inequalities and is perpetuated by the exercise of social, economic, and political power.¹

It is a barrier to receiving healthcare and engaging in help-seeking behavior and results in **discrimination** and **exclusion**.



Source: Sarah E. Stutterheim, Yvonne L. van der Kooij, Rik Crutzen, Robert A. C. Ruiter, Arjan E. R. Bos, and Gerjo KokA. "SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO STIGMA REDUCTION Intervention Mapping as a guide to developing, implementing, and evaluating stigma reduction interventions."

How Language Influences Stigma

Language is powerful — it's one of the main ways stereotypes gets created and reinforced.

- **Judgment and Blame:** Terms that imply a moral failing can foster judgment and a sense of blame rather than recognizing a person's full humanity.
- **Impacts Treatment and Care:** Stigmatizing language in medical records can lead to negative attitudes and less effective care from healthcare professionals.
- **Internalized Stigma:** Repeated exposure to negative language can lead individuals to internalize these beliefs, negatively affecting their self-worth and motivation to seek help.

The use of stigmatizing language **causes harm** to others and has lasting effects on policy, employment, quality of life and self-confidence. Small shifts in language help break the cycle of stigma → prejudice → discrimination.

Where do we start?

All of us influence how we, **as a community and as individuals**, think about addiction.

1. Use **person-first language** when writing about substance use (SU) or describing people who use drugs (PWUD).
2. Use **framing** that centers hope and healing.
3. Strive for humanization and **share narratives** that highlight personal stories.

Person-First Language

Person-first language is **neutral** and **non-judgmental**, emphasizing the person and viewing the medical condition as only part of the whole person.

Try these:

- *“person with a substance use disorder”*
- *“person with lived experience”*
- *“person in recovery”*

Someone exposed to person-first language is less likely to say that a person with a SUD is personally responsible for their medical condition and less likely to recommend punitive action. ³

Person-First Language in Practice

- When speaking about people with lived experience, emphasize their full humanity — including their relationships, interests, hopes, and dreams.
- Use language that highlights treatability.
- Recognize that each person's journey is unique and encourage respect for the choices people make around timelines, resources, and treatment types.

Sarah used MOUD, a safe and effective treatment pathway, to support her recovery.

Kaley is a wife and a person who has lived experience with substance use.

Like many other people with SUD, Tim's recovery took time.

Person-First Language in Practice

Recommended Language	Stigmatizing Language	Rationale
Substance use disorder, X use disorder	Substance abuse, drug abuse, drug habit, drug problem	Neutral, non-judgmental language carries fewer implications of blame and increases understanding that SUD is a medical condition.
Recurrence of substance use	Relapse, lapse, slip	Neutral, non-judgmental language indicates that a recurrence is a normal part of a person’s journey rather than a break or error in their recovery.
Substance-free, no longer using X substance, testing negative for substance use	Clean	Terms like “dirty” / “clean” are associated with filth, not a medical condition.

A Note on Self-Identification

Language and identity are deeply personal. When we educate on and encourage the use of non-stigmatizing language, we’re establishing best practices for the **general public**. We are **not** telling people with lived experience how they should identify.

Framing for Good

The way a concept is packaged and presented influences audiences’ attitudes and beliefs. Framing is the choices we make in what we emphasize, how and what we explain, and what we leave unsaid.

Many common story frames do not reflect the complexities of addiction and may introduce or reinforce existing stigmatizing beliefs.

Common Stigmatizing Frame	Stigmatizing Frame Example	Non-Stigmatizing Framing
Victimization	“Suffering” / “Struggling”	“is being treated for...”
Exceptionalism	NIMBY (Us vs. Them)	Community Solutions (We)
Treatability	“Curable” / “Incurable”	Treatment Pathways
Myth-busting	Do this, not that.	Here's why we do this.
Recovery Only	Recovery is the ultimate solution.	Recovery status does not define value as a human.
Binary (Recovery/Active Use)	“When I was in active use, I was untrustworthy.”	“My friends who use substances are some of the kindest people I know.”

A Note on Imagery

Stigmatizing imagery can reinforce negative attitudes and beliefs about individuals with SUD. It can also be triggering for people with lived experience and family or friends.

Stigmatizing Imagery ⁴



Non-Stigmatizing Imagery ⁴



Source: Hulseley, J., Zawislak, K., Sawyer-Morris, G. et al. Stigmatizing imagery for substance use disorders: a qualitative exploration. Health Justice 11, 28 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-023-00229-6>.

The Power of Storytelling

Centering the stories of people with lived experience has the power to counter misinformation, increase proximity, and connect audiences to resources.

Themes

- Hope
- Healing
- Strong Character
- Accomplishments
- Supportive Relationships

Messengers

- People w/ Lived Experience
- Friends & Family Members
- Experts/Professionals in the Field

Key Takeaways

Audit your own language. Identify outdated and stigmatizing terms in your own writing and speech. Then, replace them with person-first, neutral alternatives.

Edit with a stigma-free lens. Commit to reviewing language, framing, and imagery related to substance use and related concepts in your work. Regularly seek out reputable sources to provide direction on appropriate language to use.

Share your knowledge. Adopt a practice of explaining which terms you are using and why, especially to others who may not be familiar with neutral/non-judgmental language.

Resources

- [Recovery Research Institute: Addictionary](#)
- [Frameworks Institute](#)
- [Social Change Initiative | Narrative Change](#)
- [Shatterproof | Language Guide](#)



Reporting Best Practices

HANNA WEBSTER

PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE, HEALTH REPORTER

Current landscape of the opioid/drug space

- Fatal overdoses are decreasing
- Medetomidine's role
- Patchwork supply: BTMPS, -caine drugs (as many as 4–12 substances)
- Polysubstance use
 - In Pa. in 2024, 41% of fatal overdoses involved a combination of stimulants and fent (Pennsylvania Office of Drug Surveillance & Misuse Prevention)
- Drug scheduling debates
 - 7-OH, xylazine, cannabis
- Shapiro allocating \$\$\$ in budget address for substance use disorder
- Federal funding cuts for recovery support organizations

Infighting within the recovery community



‘I felt I was being taught how to feel’: Bereaved parents are divided in how to tackle fentanyl

A Harrisburg event leading up to International Overdose Awareness Day highlights differences in how best to fight the highly potent drug

<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/health/2025/08/31/fentanyl-overdose-prevention/stories/202508310086>

Infighting within the recovery community

The chief disagreement is this: Some view their child's death as a murder and insist on the term "poisoning" over "overdose." These parents tend to seek retribution for dealers and support criminalization, whereas other moms hold firmly to the notion that addiction is a disease and hope for stronger social services.

Bedford County mom Lynn Beck, for one, has lost relationships over this debate.

"I've gotten yelled at for saying the word 'overdose,'" she said. Her daughter, Jessie Deni, died in 2018 on her 24th birthday from fentanyl. "I've had people tell me, 'your daughter was murdered.' I felt I was being taught how to feel."

Tips for combatting stigma

- Your sources are the experts in their experiences
- Interview to learn from them
- Recognize the systemic issues that got us here: many people who use drugs are also struggling with housing, poverty, domestic violence or abusive relationships, systemic racism, and trauma
- Use person-first language
- Use data to bolster your findings

Trust building

- Consistency is key: keep showing up
- Be transparent about your process and your intentions with the interview
- Review statements, quotes back when you can
- Try to follow up

Be on the ground whenever possible



Local recovery center reacts to a just-signed xylazine law: 'This is going to be very bad'



HANNA WEBSTER ✓
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
hwebster@post-gazette.com

MAY 16, 2024

7:23 PM

Be on the ground whenever possible



Caught in fentanyl's unrelenting grip: The tragic story of Elliott Henry is the story of thousands in Pa.

His overdose death was one of more than 3,000 in Pennsylvania last year alone



HANNA WEBSTER ✓
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
hwebster@post-gazette.com

JUN 9, 2024 5:30 AM



<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/health/2024/06/09/fentanyl-crisis-elliott-henry/stories/202406090059>

Contact & Follow



hwebster@post-gazette.com



[@hannamwebster.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/@hannamwebster.bsky.social)



[@hannamwebster](https://x.com/hannamwebster)



Q & A

Resources & Follow-Up

[PA-DDAP.INFO/LUUCOMMRESOURCES](https://pa-ddap.info/luucommresources)

